

Clare Bradford, *The Middle Ages in Children's Literature*, Houndmills/Basingstoke/Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Hardback, 209 pages.

In her latest monograph titled *The Middle Ages in Children's Literature* Clare Bradford traces the occurrence of 'medievalisms' – textual elements drawing on medieval culture – in contemporary texts for young readers. Starting from the observation that the Middle Ages is ubiquitous in present-day children's and young adult literature, Bradford scrutinises how the medieval functions in it and what meaning medievalisms can convey. The central notion underlying this study is the idea that the past and the present coexist. It is underpinned by an argumentation concerning the past-present-relationship which builds on incongruity and coalescence simultaneously. Bradford's pivotal assumption is that the present cannot observe and understand itself, but that it can draw on the past in order to remedy this and, hence, to make sense of itself.

Seeing that narratives incorporating settings, tropes, or characters from bygone eras create a reassuring distance in relation to the present, texts of this kind enable the present to analyse itself. This is the starting point for Bradford's examination of *medievalist* texts within children's literature, which, as she convincingly argues, lend themselves to discussions of *contemporary* preoccupations. Medievalist texts engage distancing strategies much like those employed in secondary world fantasies or dystopian narratives in which social criticism is voiced. As for the topic at hand, Bradford explains that it is precisely because the Middle Ages are so different from our time that medievalist texts are exceedingly well-suited as textual frameworks for addressing present-day societal issues. This in turn is in keeping with the socialising impetus many adult gatekeepers of children's literature ascribe to children's books.

The gist of the matter is that, despite the observed dissimilarities between past and present, the past is very much present in the present. As such, this study advocates cognizance of the dependence of the present on the past. Furthermore, it deliberately departs from the traditional reconstructionist way of treating historical fiction in children's literature studies and instead ties in with the deconstructionist approach characteristic of the so-called narrative turn in the discipline of history.

The texts used to illustrate the book's principal train of thought stem from a wide variety of genres (including films) and are primarily Anglo-Saxon in origin. The case studies are organised thematically, in chapters dealing with time, space, disabilities, monsters, animals, and comical elements respectively. Some of the primary sources are cleverly incorporated in more than one chapter, thus investing the argumentation with an augmented sense of coherence.

In many of the examples Bradford discusses, medievalisms playing on the alterity and strangeness of the Middle Ages work to destabilise prevailing social structures and culturally accepted ideas. Some books do so by using the Middle Ages as a superficial, mechanical backdrop, which draws attention to the plot in which contemporary ideological questions are acted out. This is the case in *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch & Martchenko, 1980) and *Jane and the Dragon* (Baynton, 1988), for example, in which received gender roles are questioned.

Similarly, multi-temporal fantasies and time-travel narratives tend to depict life in the Middle Ages as simplistic and inflexible and hence cast the present as desirable (*The Wednesday Wizard* (Jordan, 1991), *Dream Master Nightmare* (Breslin, 2000), and Charlie Fletcher's Stoneheart trilogy (2006-2008)). Only in a few rare cases is the representation of the Middle Ages as rigid countered, for example when personal

development is framed against settings in which elements from different times are mixed (*The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman, 2008)).

In terms of spatiality, medieval and modern settings are often contrasted. Settings from the past, including the manor house (*The Wouldbegoods* (Nesbit, 1901), *The Stones of Green Knowe* (Boston, 1976)) and gothic buildings (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Disney, 1996), *Ghost Abbey* (Westall, 1988), *The Stones of Muncaster Cathedral* (Westall, 1991)), represent continuity and tradition and are demonstrated to either invoke fear or provide refuge.

The chapter focussing on corporality shows narratives positioning the readers to align with disabled characters in order to highlight the notion of otherness and interrogate the normativity of able-bodied individuals (*How to Train Your Dragon* (DreamWorks, 2010), *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* (Shlitz, 2007), *The Hunchback*, *The Witch's Brat* (Sutcliff, 1970), *Crusade* (Laird, 2008)). The related topic of monstrous bodies is the focal point of chapter five. In the texts dealt with here, the way in which monsters are treated mirrors contemporary cultural anxieties, such as antithetical intercultural relationships (*Crusade*, *Let the Right One In* (Lindqvist, 2007)) or the destabilisation of the category 'human' (*Wicked Lovely* (Marr, 2007), *Lament* (Stiefvater, 2008), *Let the Right One In*, *Seraphina* (Hartman, 2012)) also central in posthumanism.

The dragons and werewolves tackled in the fifth chapter establish a link with the subsequent chapter on animals and their reciprocal connection with humans. Some of the cases scrutinised are demonstrated to advocate an ecocritical, inclusive viewpoint on the relationship between human and non-human elements, thereby undercutting anthropocentrism (*The Midwife's Apprentice* (Cushman, 1995), the Arthur trilogy by Kevin Crossley-Holland (2000-2003), *Fire, Bed & Bone* (Branford, 1998), *The Minstrel and the Dragon Pup* (Sutcliff, 1993)). Other texts (*Beka Cooper: Terrier* (Pierce, 2006), *Redwall* (Jacques, 1986)) are shown to be more ambivalent toward animal figures.

The seventh and final chapter considers the Middle Ages as a source of laughable subject matter. It includes narratives undermining stereotypes concerning masculine, chivalrous, and heroic behaviour (*Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), *The Paper Bag Princess*, *King Nonn the Wiser* (McNaughton, 1980), *How to Train Your Dragon*). Moreover, comic works of non-fiction foregrounding the strangeness of the Middle Ages are analysed, and an antiauthoritarian impetus is shown to underlie the *Horrible Histories* books and television series, for example.

Clare Bradford's eloquent, well-founded rationale builds up to the conclusion that the Middle Ages has become a cultural lingua franca, a claim which she illustrates more than persuasively throughout the book. Furthermore, she argues that contemporary medievalisms are as much about the Middle Ages as they are about our own times. In effect, due to its efforts to lay bare socio-critical tendencies, her study is firmly rooted in the ideology-critical approach characteristic of the work of other renowned Australian scholars of children's literature such as Kerry Mallan, Robyn McCallum, and John Stephens. The bottom line of the majority of Bradford's case studies is that binarisms are not productive, however appealing they may appear for structuring our lived experiences. This holds true especially for those dyads in which one of the two extremities is privileged over the other. Bradford's argumentation, then, reads as a plea for empathy and openness to other perspectives, both in day-to-day intersubjective relationships and in terms of interdisciplinarity, viz. being open to other approaches to the (literary) texts we are dealing with. This book will undoubtedly come to serve as a source of inspiration for studies of an ideology-critical kind tackling all kinds of discriminatory mindsets.

Sara Van den Bossche

Ghent University, Belgium & Tilburg University, The Netherlands